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Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and children carrying flowers greet Pope Fran

Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and children carrying flowers greet Pope Francis upon his arrival at Figo Maduro Air Base in Lisbon Aug. 2, 2023. The pope began a five-day trip to Portugal to participate in World Youth Day. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Editor's note: *This story was updated Aug. 2 at 12:26 p.m. CT to include reporting on the pope's second major address of the day.*

Pope Francis on Aug. 2 kicked off a 5-day visit here in the Portuguese capital to preside over a major Catholic youth festival with a blunt message for European leaders: invest in young people rather than weapons.

"It is troubling when we read that in many places funds continue to be invested in arms rather than in the future of the young," said Francis.

With war raging on the continent, the pope lamented that Europe — long celebrated for its commitment to dialogue and social solidarity — seems paralyzed by its inability to find a peaceful way forward.

"Where are you sailing, if you are not showing the world paths of peace, creative ways for bringing an end to the war in Ukraine and to the many other conflicts causing so much bloodshed?," the pope asked.

"Your technologies, which have brought progress and globalized the world are not by themselves sufficient, much less your highly sophisticated weapons, which do not represent investments for the future but a depletion of its authentic human capital: that of education, health, the welfare state," he lamented.

Nearly 400,000 young people from some 200 countries — including Ukraine and Russia — have descended upon Lisbon for a weeklong Catholic festival known as World Youth Day that takes place in a different city every few years and is capped off by a visit from the pope. This week's gathering in Portugal marks the fourth World Youth Day during Francis' decadelong papacy.

The pope's first stop here in Portugal was a private meeting with its president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, at the country's presidential palace. Outside, thousands of young people hoping to get an early glimpse of the pontiff chanted "We are the youth of the pope," while waving various country flags and banners.

Following an official welcome ceremony, replete with a military cannon salute, the pope made his way to to Lisbon's Cultural Center of Belém where he used his first public remarks to effectively lead an examination of conscience for the continent's political and diplomatic leaders, encouraging them to seek global solutions to the problems facing a divided world.

"Planetary injustice, wars, climate and migration crises: these seem to run faster than our ability, and often our will, to confront these challenges in a united way," he said.

The pope recalled that in the aftermath of two world wars, former enemies joined together in hopes of building a better future — an example he said that is sorely needed for today.

"This goal was attained by initiating processes of dialogue and inclusion and by developing a diplomacy of peace aimed at settling conflicts and lessening tensions, attentive to the slightest signals of distension and reading between the most crooked lines," he said. "This is the spirit of the whole, inspired by the European dream of a multilateralism broader than merely that of the West."

While some 80% of Portuguese identify as Catholic, only 20% attend weekly Mass, mirroring the same secularizing trends that have rippled across the developed world. Earlier this year, the traditionally Catholic country legalized euthanasia for people with incurable illnesses, and, in 2007, it liberalized its abortion laws.

The pope, however, offered a thinly veiled criticism of these changes.

"I think of so many unborn children, and older persons who are abandoned, of the great challenge of welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating those who come from afar and knock on our doors, and the isolation felt by so many families that find it hard to bring children into the world and raise them," he said.

"Where are you sailing if, before life’s ills, you offer hasty but mistaken remedies: like easy access to death, a convenient answer that seems ‘sweet’ but is in fact more bitter than the waters of the sea?," Francis asked.

Despite a bleak global landscape that the pope said offers "fertile terrain for forms of populism and conspiracy theories," Francis said that the very fact that hundreds of thousands of young people have come from around the globe this week to encounter each other offers an antidote to today's societal ills.

"World Youth Day," he said, "represents a chance to build together."

Prior to his first meeting with young people tomorrow, Aug. 3, his opening remarks served as marching orders to the country's leaders. If they are truly interested in giving young people hope for the future, he said, they must build an economy that properly distributes wealth, enact measures to make it more hospitable for young people to build families and must commit to greater action to protect the environment.

"How can we claim to believe in young people, if we do not give them healthy spaces in which to build the future?" he asked.

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During his second major address of the day, the pope met with the country's bishops, priests and women and men religious for a vespers celebration at the iconic 16th century Jerónimos Monastery, where Francis directly acknowledged Catholicism's decline in the country.

"This is not uncommon in countries of ancient Christian tradition, buffeted by social and cultural changes and increasingly marked by secularism, indifference to God and growing detachment from the practice of the faith," he said, encouraging them not to grow wary and to be willing to try new strategies for evangelization.

"It is often accentuated by the disappointment and anger with which some people view the church, at times due to our poor witness and the scandals that have marred her face and call us to a humble and ongoing purification, starting with the anguished cry of the victims, who must always be accepted and listened to," he continued.

Earlier this year, an independent commission released a report finding that Catholic clergy members in Portugal had abused more than 4,800 children since 1950. The report sent shock waves throughout the country and is expected to loom large over the pope's time here, where he is expected to hold a private meeting with abuse survivors at some point.

"This is not the time to stop and give up, to drag the boat to shore or to look back," the pope encouraged the country's religious leaders. "We must not take flight from the present out of fear, or take refuge in forms and practices of the past. Now is the God-given time of grace to sail boldly into the sea of evangelization and of mission."

The pope went on to mention the ongoing synod process, where in October, some 500 Catholics are scheduled to meet in Rome to discuss a number of hot button issues in church life today.

"On the boat of the church, there has to be room for everyone: All the baptized are called on board to lower the nets, becoming personally involved in the preaching of the Gospel," the pope said.

During the three-hour flight from Rome, the 86-year-old Francis who underwent a hernia operation earlier this summer, greeted the journalists traveling with him for just over 20 minutes. Despite his recent hospitalization and ongoing mobility issues,

the pope said that the high octane youth gathering would provide him with some much needed energy.

"I will come back more youthful," he said.

Tomorrow, Aug. 3, during his first full day here, the pope is scheduled for back-to-back dialogues with young people, before an official welcome ceremony with the World Youth Day participants in an event that could draw as many as half a million participants in the heart of the Portuguese capital.

This story appears in the **World Youth Day 2023** feature series. View the full series
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